WILLIAM ADDISON DWIGGINS

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A Talk Delivered to

The Bookbuilders of Boston

April MCMLXXIII

by DOROTHY ABBE

The Boston Public Library

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FINE ARTS DEPARTMENT
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WAD

As always, concerning Bill Dwiggins, one would speak first of the man, then of the artist, for he was one of those rare individuals who combined great talent with a magnetic personality. No one could be in his presence even momentarily without being aware of the radiance which characterized him — a man of subtle wit and gentle humor; sophisticated, yet ingenuous; and without pretension. Devoid of professional jealousy, he was always willing to share his knowledge with any who could avail themselves of it. However great his authority, he did not impose.

His innate talent found expression along many lines: calligraphy, type design, advertising layout, book typography, typographical ornament via stencils, illustration; wood carving and marionettes; the writing of books and essays; occasional excursions into architecture, furniture design,

mural painting, kite-flying and weathervane-making; stencil and woodcut prints, watercolor painting; and the making of his own tools.

However familiar I may be with his work in these many fields, I am, even yet, amazed at his prodigious output, the more so because he worked deliberately and unhurriedly. The intense concentration as he bent over the drawing table — one stood quietly apart, waiting for him to look up. Presently he swung from his stool. With a final glance at the piece that absorbed him, he reached for tobacco and, filling his pipe, slowly turned toward you, smiling his welcome. This was ever his way — the smile, the slow unhurried steps, emphasized by the simplicity of his dress, always in white. Not only did he move slowly, but he worked slowly in the sense that the first effort was usually discarded, to be written, or drawn, or carved, again and again. And yet in this quiet, patient manner he brought into being more than most people even dream of.

William Addison Dwiggins was born in 1880 in Ohio where he grew up in the town of Cambridge. In November 1899, according to the local papers, he departed for Chicago to attend the Frank

Holme School of Illustration, accompanied by the good wishes of a host of friends who predicted that he would become a master in his chosen field. There he studied lettering under Frederic Goudy, the type designer.

In the spring of 1903 Dwiggins returned to Cambridge where he established the Guernsey Shop with the intention of producing illustrated books, but this venture was short-lived for the following year he accepted Goudy's invitation to join him in Hingham, Massachusetts, where the Village Press had recently been relocated.

Although Goudy moved on to New York in 1906, Dwiggins had by then made the acquaintance of such men as D. B. Updike of the Merrymount Press and Bruce Rogers, then at Houghton Mifflin Co. Early in 1907 Dwiggins began to execute commissions for Updike who soon realized his potential, as may be seen in the fact that in 1908 he procured a grant for him to go to Europe, and saw to it that Dwiggins accepted, giving him introductions to friends and hotels as well. Dwiggins wrote: "It is amazing how much there is over here, in my line, to see, and how anything could be done without seeing it, I don't know. Them as made the trip possible may rest

very easy in regard to the question whether it was worth while." Years later Mrs. Dwiggins recalled: "We worked hard in London, at our solemn duty of seeing all the right things . . . it was terribly hard work. He was so vividly receptive, his artist's eye saw a thousand times more than I did and the emotions of it tore at his vitality. He couldn't take a whole day of it. All the way through our trip we had to spend hours in our hotel just reading and resting."

Despite the fact that Dwiggins' interest in printing lay in the making of books, most of his work until the mid-twenties was in the advertising field. Among his many clients were the Strathmore and Warren Paper Companies, *Direct Advertising*, New England Telephone, J. Walter Thompson, to name a very few. The commissions were many but the recompense small, obliging him to do "pot-boilers" in the form of hundreds of furniture drawings made as newspaper ads for the Paine Furniture Company. Nearly all of the advertising work made use of his skill as a calligrapher, even the Paine ads at times, as did the numerous mottoes, cards, and calendars which he produced for Alfred Bartlett.

One is tempted to protest the terrible waste of a unique talent expended upon so many ephemeral pieces, most of which have long since been destroyed and forgotten. Yet the design and execution of hundreds of hand-lettered commissions, however mundane, served as superb training in the anatomy of letter forms.

Dwiggins was exerting an influence as early as 1912 when Will Bradley noted that the work of Cleland and Dwiggins had brought taste and skill "back into a branch of artistic endeavor which had sunk to the lowest possible depths before their appearance."

Layout in Advertising, published by Harper and Bros. in 1928, reissued in 1948, was the culmination of Dwiggins' long career in this field, and for many years regarded as the standard text on the subject. The *Saturday Review* declared: "Professional advertising men will welcome it, use it until it is threadbare, and be better craftsmen as a result." And it concludes: "It is a good book. Mr. Dwiggins writes as well as he designs — which is high praise."

Every now and then during these so-called advertising years Dwiggins took time out to satisfy the

inner craving to produce the kind of work in which he took particular delight — things such as stencil and woodcut prints, or calligraphy for his small periodical, or the writing of stories and articles. This yearning to satisfy himself, combined with the unremitting need to earn a living often resulted in periods of overwork, to the detriment of his health. When in 1922 he was told that he had diabetes, at that time a potentially fatal disease, he resolved thenceforth to satisfy himself. As he wrote the following year: "Me I am a happy invalid and it has revolutionized my whole attack. My back is turned on the more banal kind of advertising, and I have cancelled all commissions and am resolutely set on starving. . . . I will produce art on paper and wood after my own heart with no heed to any market." Fortunately, starving was unnecessary, in as much as the next four or five years were to build up to the most creative period of his life.

His ambition was to make books according to his own insights which fell between the two extremes then current: the excessively poor quality of the trade books on the one hand, and, at the other extreme, the excessively precious handmade-paper,

limited edition standard of fine printing. Dwiggins expressed his opinion of trade books in a pamphlet published in 1919 under the imprint of his imaginary Society of Calligraphers, of which, as Dr. Hermann Püterschein, Dwiggins was president; and, as W. A. Dwiggins, secretary. In essence *Extracts from an Investigation into the Physical Properties of Books* found that "All Books of the Present Day are Badly Made." The pamphlet was well circulated, "condemned, denied by those in the trade — and then the awful truth came out. It was all a fabrication, and Dwiggins had done it." But it made its point, as Paul Hollister noted in 1937: "Take any fifty 'trade books' of 1917, set along side them their counterparts of 1937, Dwiggins or not, and you will see what has happened to the physical properties of books and how often today's books echo his innovations. You can thank him mostly for starting it."

Meanwhile he had arrived at his own determination of fine printing. And it differed very considerably from that of Goudy, Updike, and Rogers. For Dwiggins' reaction to the machine age had evolved along different lines. Basically, to quote him: "It is not a matter of machine-set

vs. hand-set. It is a question of an artist and a merchant." That is to say, the products of modern technology as applied to books were not obliged to be shoddy. He saw no reason why they should not be attractive, well-designed, set on the machine, and printed on decent machine-made paper. He thought that photoengraving should make calligraphy widely available. He wanted to use ornament that would harmonize with type as did the fleurons of the early printers, but not by reworking elements culled from early printed books; rather by making his own designs.

As if to prove that he needed but to throw discretion to the winds — "cancel all commissions" — 1923, the very year in which he did so, was to mark a change of fortune, leading to professional recognition as well as providing books to design "after his own heart." In 1924 he was made an honorary member of the Society of Printers, Boston. In October of the following year the Double Crown Club of London bestowed membership upon him, the Club's list for 1926-'27 showing Dwiggins as an honorary member along with Updike, Rogers, and five European designers.

Here I should like to digress to consider a style of ornamentation, uniquely his, which he had devised as a result of earlier experiments. He began by engraving small decorative units on many little pieces of wood ranging in size from approximately one-quarter of an inch to a little over an inch in area. These were to be used in the manner of rubber stamps inked from a pad saturated with India ink. Because he found that "the uncertainties incident to the process are maddening," Dwiggins then tried to find a way in which he could make designs — unlimited in number, style, and purpose — from small units or elements. By cutting these elements in transparent celluloid, he found that they could readily be combined into the desired patterns, then stencilled with a brush and India ink. And so he cut hundreds of elements ranging from a dot or curve to small ornaments which could be used separately or in combination to build up larger designs. Thus he devised vignettes and other decorative pieces, in this way creating typographical ornaments whose sharp, knifecut lines proved especially harmonious with type.

Dwiggins also used stencils in various other ways, particularly for illustrations, sometimes mak-

ing them directly with watercolors through the stencil plates, at other times reproducing them from line cuts.

Twelve books from eight publishers in the six years between 1923 and 1928 confirmed the change of fortune; and in nearly all of these books Dwiggins made use of one or the other of the decorative processes just described. It was for *Modern Color*, published by Harvard University Press in 1923, that he used the little woodcut stamps to compose the ten chapter headings. In addition, the binding is one of Dwiggins' choicest. Of this volume it was said: "That this is a book to delight the eye is due to WAD — that incomparable playboy of typography." Among the three books designed by Dwiggins in 1926 was *My Mortal Enemy*, his first for Knopf.

Publisher's Weekly declared 1928 to be a Dwiggins year, as indeed it seemed with eight books of his design, including two of which he was author as well: the previously mentioned *Layout in Advertising*, and *Paraphs*, his second Knopf book, a collection of seven of his essays. Although in all eight books he made use of stencils, one way or another, it is in *Paraphs* that one

is most aware of a new kind of ornamentation. Another feature of these books, characteristically Dwiggins, is found in their hand-lettered shelf-backs. Of several hundred bindings of his design I doubt that there are a score for which he used type rather than lettering. Furthermore, I would venture to say that Dwiggins as a designer of book covers has not been approached, either in originality, or in the decorative use of calligraphy.

In February 1928 the American Institute of Graphic Arts held an exhibition of Dwiggins' work on the occasion of awarding him the Institute's Gold Medal. Thus by early 1929 he had received some of the highest honors that the leading typographical societies in Boston, London, and New York could confer. And yet his entire career in type design lay ahead of him, his long association with Alfred Knopf had scarcely begun, and the special books for the Limited Editions Club and other publishers lay in the future. These amazing facts bear testimony to the quality of the ephemeral advertisements which had occupied so much of his time in earlier years. With almost no book design, as such, to his credit, these honors signified notable recognition.

Alfred Knopf described his long and fruitful association with Dwiggins as "something unique in twentieth-century publishing." Underlying this successful collaboration was Knopf's willingness to give Dwiggins a free hand, defending him on the rare occasions when the author tried to interfere. Over a period of thirty years, for this one firm, Dwiggins designed in their entirety two-hundred and eighty books, contributing title page, or binding, or other detail to an additional fifty-five. Thus his dream of improving the physical properties of trade books was more than realized, not only in the quality of his own work, but also in the example that the Knopf books set for other publishers.

Dwiggins eventually begged to be let off from making jackets, primarily because he had forsworn advertising in all its manifestations; secondly, because he felt that the vagaries of the trade had no place for his kind of jacket. Which is a pity, for *his* kind of jacket would catch your eye in any bookstore — by its layout, lettering, or skillful use of strident colors.

Another association that lasted to the end of his life was that with the Mergenthaler Linotype

Company. By chance, a remark in *Layout in Advertising* resulted in his first type face, *Metroblack*, a uniform sans-serif letter which appeared in 1929. This was the first of a total of eighteen type faces which Dwiggins brought to various stages of completion, five of which were issued for general use, and five used experimentally.

Electra, a "design not based on any traditional model" was published in 1935, followed by nine small *florets* in 1936.

Caledonia, one of the most popular faces in use today, was announced in 1939. Although originally inspired by the work of Scotch typefounders, thence the name, Dwiggins explained: "One was not trying for a revival, one wanted something modern and individual."

The suite of twenty-nine decorative units called *Caravan* was issued in 1941.

Eldorado, 1953, reflected some of the flavor of Spanish typographic tradition.

Dwiggins finished his work on *Falcon*, his fifth and last published face, in 1944, but it was not issued until 1962, six years after his death.

During the Second World War the Linotype Company, although unable to bring out new type faces, was very willing to have Dwiggins go

on with his experiments in type design. Five faces were completed in the 12-point pilot size to a degree that they could be used experimentally in books: *Stuyvesant*, with its particularly beautiful italic; *Charter*, a special-purpose script type; *Arcadia*, "enough unlike anything on the market to do the trick I am anxious to do, namely, expand the range;" *Tippecanoe*, a kind of flexible steel-pen, Bodoni-like letter; and *Winchester*, an old style roman with an alternate uncial version.

In addition there are three experiments in Greek alphabets; an extremely legible 7-point *Newsface*; and *Alexandria*, the last face upon which he worked, was an experiment "to see what would happen if the roman forms were written in the Greek style of modelling."

From the early thirties the work for Knopf and Linotype were basic to Dwiggins' professional life. But that did not preclude commissions from other publishers such as Random House, The Limited Editions Club, The Overbrook Press, and others, resulting in some of his most distinguished books. These special editions all exhibited one or more decorative details such as hand-lettered title pages and chapter titles; vignettes and initial

letters; illustrations; hand-lettered bindings with specially created ornaments, either drawn or made from stencils. Thus in the same way that the Knopf books allowed him to realize his ideas of trade book design, so did these special editions perform that function in regard to fine printing.

In 1930 some of Dwiggins' friends wished to produce a certain marionette play although they had no marionettes. Dwiggins was glad to oblige, not that he cared for marionettes *per se*, but rather he welcomed the woodcarving and theatrical designing that it entailed.

The first theater with its dramatically colorful proscenium arch was located in the remodelled garage back of the Dwiggins' home. Of the nineteen, 12-inch marionettes, some were made in part by the puppeteers working from a Dwiggins prototype, the artist representing each character to perfection in the carving of the heads. The costumes, also of his design, were made by Mrs. Dwiggins working from his sketches.

In 1937 Dwiggins designed his new studio building to conform to the demands of the kettle-hole across the street from his home, drawing the plans, and occasionally lending a hand in its con-

struction, particularly in the addition of handmade latches, lampshades, and other decorative touches. The Studio had two stories, each with ground-level entrances, the workshop being located above and a completely equipped marionette theater below. The proscenium of this theater, altogether different from that of the first, was equally handsome. For the second group of twenty-six marionettes Dwiggins devised a far more refined method of construction which he presented in book form in 1939 under the title *Marionette in Motion*, the clearly drawn diagrams on the left-hand pages facing the descriptive text on the right, written in his calligraphic hand.

There were, in addition, a half dozen marionette characters in the shape of ingeniously conceived machines made for a play which was published by Knopf in 1945 under the title *Millennium I*. The jacket states the thesis: "Automatic machines have been brought to such a pitch of perfection that you can almost believe that they do their own thinking. Suppose that machines take the next step in their own kind of evolution and arrive at a stage where they actually *do* do their own thinking — become rational individuals able to plan and execute. Would human-

kind have to knuckle under and let them run the earth? If so, how do we go about recovering control?" Such an idea first came into his mind in 1911; forty years later he wrote in my copy of the book: "It isn't so very far out at that, what?" And that was twenty years ago!

This amazingly original and complete experiment with marionettes occupied barely twelve years of Dwiggins' so-called spare time between 1930 and 1942, but it had provided an outlet for this many-talented man that the graphic arts could not supply.

It has been stated that Dwiggins was a skillful writer. In addition to the three books already noted, two others should be mentioned. *Toward a Reform of the Paper Currency*, 1932, pointed out the visual deficiencies of the United States stamps and paper money. Written as a serious protest, it was phrased with his characteristic light touch. *WAD to RR*, 1940, is another of his calligraphic books, written in an italic-style letter, with stunning, large script captions, the book growing out of Dwiggins' generous response to Rudolph Ruzicka's inquiry as to how to go about designing a type face.

In 1937 the American Institute of Graphic Arts held another exhibition of his work, issuing a handsome catalog to commemorate it. Addressing a capacity audience at the opening, Carl Rollins of Yale Press said: "Here in this room then, one sees the result of a third of a century of creative effort in the graphic arts by a master draftsman. In variety it excells almost any other exhibition I can imagine. In faultless clarity of technique it could be equalled by few contemporary designers. In the expression of a quiet, humorous, courageous personality I think its equal would be hard to find."

Ten years later, in 1947, Harvard University conferred an honorary degree upon him, the citation reading: "William Addison Dwiggins: Typographical designer, whose skill and creative imagination have left a lasting impress on the pages of our time."

The following year, June through August, The Bookbuilders held an exhibition of Dwiggins' work at the Boston Public Library. He was present on this occasion, attending the dinner which preceded the opening, and displaying his usual amiable disposition. But such activities drained him physically, and were, as well, emotionally dis-

tressing in that they recalled work long since laid aside and forgotten.

In 1949 he was made a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Boston.

Through the forties Dwiggins was occupied chiefly with the work for Knopf and the Linotype Company, and toward the end, with the productions of Püterschein-Hingham, the private press which we shared together. But by the Fifties the long working days which had been his life were gradually being shortened, due to his slowly failing health, the increasingly shaky hand which had so long been a handicap, and eyes clouded with cataracts. During the last two years, until his death on Christmas Day, 1956, no longer able to do much work but only share a vicarious pleasure in the activities of our little shop, his humor and courage never left him. But that is not to say that there weren't moments of regret: no amount of past success could compensate for the ideas he had in mind which he knew would never be realized.

It is said that art should be judged apart from the artist who created it. On that basis Dwiggins' work will stand, and will be seen as highly original, at the same time resting on sound principles of

design. It has been said that his work is not "monumental" — as if that were the only criterion. Perhaps he was nearer the truth in viewing life less seriously, less "monumentally." Yet as a counterbalance he had that extraordinary sensitivity which made him more than normally aware of the vicissitudes of life, a sensitivity hardly to be endured unless united to an exceptionally joyous disposition, generous and understanding, so humanely disposed toward others. In some intangible way these qualities show in his work, and set it apart. One's perception of Dwiggins, the artist, can only be deepened by a knowledge of Dwiggins, the man, who said: "It was a grand adventure; I am content."

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The ornaments
used for the cover and tailpiece
were built up by Dwiggins
from several small stencil elements

The text is set in Dwiggins' Electra